

Bicentennial Showed Even in Divided Times, Americans Can Come Together to Party

January 7, 2026 **by Dan McCue**



A scene from New York on America's Bicentennial. (Photo by Dan McCue)

WASHINGTON — It seemed as though the country couldn't possibly grow more divided.

After two decades of U.S. involvement and 10 years of hard fighting, the Vietnam War had finally ended with the fall of Saigon and desperate refugees amassing on the roof of the American embassy, hoping to secure a helicopter ride to freedom.

Watergate had concluded equally ignobly, with a president resigning in disgrace for the first time in history.

The nation suffered another blow when the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, the largely Arab confederation of

oil producers just starting to become known as OPEC, announced they would not sell to countries that had backed Israel in the Arab-Israeli war of October 1973.

The resulting gasoline shortages pitted neighbor against neighbor at the pump, with long lines for gas regularly bubbling over into confrontations.

Then, in the space of 17 days in the fall of 1975, two women, in two different California cities, took aim and tried to assassinate President Gerald Ford.

Yet for all this, when the calendar turned to 1976, Americans throughout the country again exhibited their resilience and began gearing up for the party of a lifetime, their nation's bicentennial.

As the United States once again prepares to mark a national milestone, the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence this coming July 4th, it seems an appropriate time to reflect on the celebration that transpired 50 years ago.

Then, as now, nationwide events were staged — including the massive “Operation Sail” in New York harbor — that were intended to inspire Americans to reflect on the nation's founding ideals, the meaning of its complex history, and those things that bind, rather than separate, one citizen to another.

It wasn't easy, nor was the effort to pull it off without its own controversies.

Long Train Runnin'

Planning for the Bicentennial began a decade earlier, on July 4, 1966, when Congress voted to create the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission.

It was the summer of Bob Dylan’s “Blonde on Blonde,” the Beach Boys’ “Pet Sounds,” and the Beatles’ last ever “official” concert, performed before a sell-out crowd at Candlestick Park in San Francisco.

In Washington, the initial plan for the Bicentennial was for it to be akin to the recently concluded New York World’s Fair, a single city exposition that would be staged in either Boston or Philadelphia.

But the commission could never quite come to terms with the concept, or, if truth be told, even its mission.



Over the course of six-and-a-half years of often tumultuous debate — a period when the panel was repeatedly accused of political bias and a lack of transparency — Congress routinely intervened, changing the panel’s makeup and on more than one occasion, threatening its funding.

Finally, with time running out, it scrapped the whole thing and created a new body, the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration.

By this point in early December 1973, the idea was for the commission to encourage and coordinate a series of locally sponsored events.

Ironically, the prolonged delay in coming up with a cohesive plan gave corporate America the jump on celebrating the nation’s

founding.

On July 4, 1974, CBS television began airing “Bicentennial Minutes,” 60-second nuggets of history presented in prime time and sponsored by the Shell Oil Company, which bought each minute of airtime through the end of 1976.

The concept was simple, but effective. Each evening, a different celebrity, artist or politician would tell viewers what had happened 200 years ago that day, in the early years of the American Revolution.

In a nod to then-CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite’s famous nightly news sign-off, each minute concluded with the words, “And that’s the way it was.”

The official start of the celebration came nine months later, on April 1, 1975, when the “American Freedom Train,” a 26-car train led by one of three enormous steam engines restored for the occasion, departed Wilmington, Delaware, for a 21-month, 25,388 mile journey through each of the contiguous 48 states.

Later that month, on April 18, 1975, Ford traveled to Boston to light a third lantern at the historic Old North Church, symbolizing America’s third century.



The following day, April 19, Ford traveled to the Old North Bridge in Concord, Massachusetts, to commemorate the “shot heard round

the world” and the 200th anniversary of the Battles of Lexington and Concord.

On New Year’s Eve, 1975, with the nation primed for the start of its Bicentennial year, Ford addressed the American people, encouraging them to embrace the impending year-long celebration as a time of rebirth and renewal, and a return to traditional values.

That didn’t mean, however, that there were no more hiccups.

The Spirit of ‘76

One, ironically, involved “The Spirit of ‘76,” the iconic portrait depicting a battered but defiant drummer, fifer and flag bearer on the march, an image that by the mid-to-late 20th century, thanks to numerous reproductions, was known to just about every school kid in the nation.

It was painted by Ohioan Archibald Willard in 1875 for display during the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, and bought soon afterward by John Devereux, a Civil War general whose son had posed for the figure of the young drummer boy.

As it happened, Devereux was a proud son of Marblehead, Massachusetts, a seacoast village with strong ties to the revolution.

Settled in 1629, the town, a commercial fishing port, later became a hotbed of the Sons of Liberty, the clandestine political organization led by Samuel Adams, John Hancock and others to protest, among other things, British taxation.

Local lore was that Marblehead men had carried gunpowder to Concord in barrels labeled “fish” and had fought bravely at Bunker Hill.

Several historians have also credited the Marblehead Regiment under the command of one Col. John Glover, with saving George

Washington's army from almost certain annihilation during the Battle of Long Island.

Given this history, Devereux gifted the "Spirit of '76" to his hometown

and there it has remained ever since, hanging in the town selectmen's meeting room in Marblehead's Abbot Hall.



Justifiably proud of the painting, townsfolk for years urged the U.S. Postal Service to turn the image into a postage stamp.

In early 1975, they learned they would finally get their wish, with the image being tapped to kick off a new series of stamps celebrating the Bicentennial.

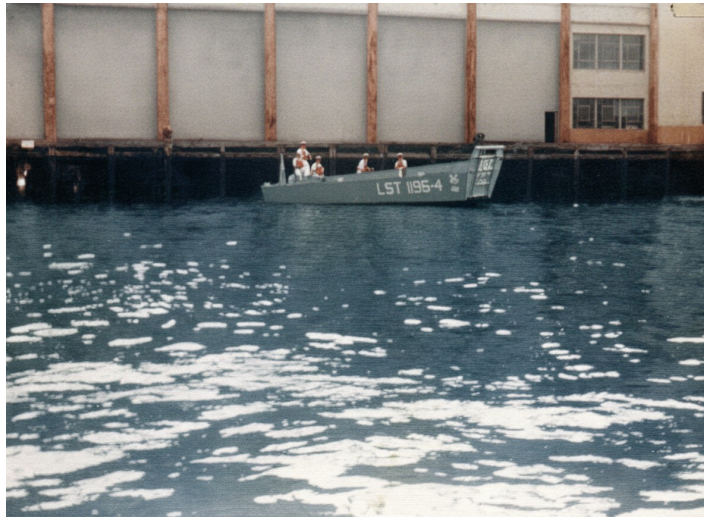
There was only one problem. Through a bureaucratic miscue, the decision was made to debut the 13¢ "Spirit of '76" postage stamp on Jan. 1, 1976, during the Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena, California.

Angered Marblehead residents blasted the decision, describing it as an insult not just to their community, but to all of New England.

Among those joining the outraged chorus were descendants of Willard, who called for the stamp to be boycotted.

Despite the outcry, the Postal Service remained unmoved, officials noting that it wasn't the painting itself that was being celebrated with the stamp, but the ideals it represented.

As for the choice of Pasadena for its debut, Pat Grist, a spokesperson for the Postal Service at the time, explained the parade — which was certain to have a massive television



audience — also happened to be called the “Spirit of ‘76” that year.

“It doesn’t have any historical integrity,” Virginia Gamage, a member of the Massachusetts Bicentennial Commission, complained to The New York Times.

She and other observers said they believed the entire Bicentennial celebration was at risk of becoming little more than a series of staged events.

“I hope they enjoy their football game,” Gamage said of the contest between Ohio State and the University of California at Los Angeles that would follow the parade.

“This is one more commentary on American life that I can’t stomach,” she said.

A Royal Visit

By the time the dust settled, momentum surrounding the Bicentennial had grown exponentially, with massive fireworks displays planned for the skies above almost every major city, and smaller, though no less spirited celebrations set for cities, towns and villages in every state.

In Washington, D.C., Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Phillip made a state visit to Ford and First Lady Betty Ford, and attended the national Bicentennial parade, for which country music legend Johnny Cash served as grand marshal.

The royal couple's visit also included sailing the East Coast aboard the British royal yacht HMY Britannia, with stops in Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York, Connecticut and Massachusetts.



While in Philadelphia, on July 6, 1976, Queen Elizabeth presented the city with the Bicentennial Bell on behalf of the British people.

The bell is a 12,446-pound replica of the Liberty Bell and was cast at the same foundry, Whitechapel Bell Foundry in London, that cast the original Liberty Bell in 1751.

The Smithsonian Institution also pulled out all the stops, opening a long-term exhibition in its Arts and Industries Building replicating the look and feel of the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, including artifacts from earlier expositions.

At the same time, the Smithsonian played host to the summer-long Bicentennial Festival of American Folklife, a collaboration with thousands of national and international scholars, folk artisans, and performers.

Finally, it opened the new home of the National Air and Space Museum.

Not to be left on the sidelines, Congress also voted to posthumously appoint George Washington “general of the Armies of the United States,” restoring his position as the highest-ranking military officer in U.S. history.

Op Sail Heralds the Revival of a Flagging NYC

Of all the events planned to mark the Bicentennial on July 4, 1976, the grandest was no doubt the parade of historic tall ships slated to begin at the Verrazzano Narrows Bridge near the mouth of New York Harbor and move up the Hudson River.

The event, officially called “Operation Sail,” had been in the works since 1971, and its planning took place against the backdrop of a worsening fiscal crisis in New York City, rising inflation, and the departure of much of the city’s manufacturing base.

The resulting economic stagnation was leading to higher unemployment rates, marked reductions in municipal services, and a rapid increase in crime.



By the time New York City Comptroller Abraham Beame was elected to succeed two-term Mayor John Lindsey in November 1973, Operation Sail was being pitched as something of a lifeboat, with

the potential to bring much needed revenue to a city teetering on bankruptcy, while also improving its image in the eyes of Americans and the rest of the world.

The driving force behind making Operation Sail happen was Frank O. Braynard, a lifelong ship enthusiast, who went from being a shipping news reporter for the New York Herald Tribune newspaper to the eventual founder of New York's South Street Seaport Museum.

Braynard's first "operation sail" was set in motion in the early 1960s, and would come to fruition as a parade of tall-masted ships presented as a tie-in to the 1964 season of the New York World's Fair.

His effort was assisted by Nils Hansell, a sailing enthusiast who worked in a publishing division of IBM, who secured the support of his boss, IBM chair Thomas Watson, Jr., and others, and eventually captured the interest of President John F. Kennedy.

It was Kennedy who established the non-profit Operation Sail, Inc., which would coordinate the 1964 sail and subsequent, similar events, but nothing would rival the scale Braynard envisioned for the Bicentennial.

In his mind, it was only natural that the nation's largest city should host its largest Bicentennial celebration, and he was determined that the focus of the epic event would be the entire scope of the maritime history of the United States.

The idea, Braynard explained time and again, was for OpSail '76 to honor the achievement and success of shipbuilders, traders, fishermen and whalers that had been critical to achievements and success of the nation.

In doing so, he said, what promised to be the largest parade of ocean-going vessels in U.S. history would celebrate several different periods of American history, rather than be limited to the Revolutionary period.



Upon turning his attention to the Bicentennial, Braynard enlisted the aid of yet another sailing enthusiast, Long Island auto leasing executive Howard Slotnick, to help carry out the logistical work behind the big show.

Together, the two men traveled to Europe, Asia, and the Soviet Union to persuade governments and private owners to send their tall-masted ships to New York.

In the end, nearly 300 large ships from more than 50 countries participated in the 18-mile-long parade up the Hudson, including 16 of the approximately 25 tall-masted ships that remained in the world at the time.

Among them were the United States square-rigger Eagle; the British schooner Sir Winston Churchill, with an all-female crew; the Italian Naval training ship the Amerigo Vespucci; the Romanian bark Mircea; and the Russian four-masted Kruzenshtern.

The only noteworthy controversy in the days leading up to July 4 was the participation of the Chilean ship, the Esmeralda.

Critics charged scores of political prisoners had been tortured on the ship after the 1973 military coup that overthrew President Salvador Allende.

Several human rights groups expressed opposition to its inclusion, and protesters vowed to assemble at the pier if the ship was allowed to dock in New York.

Braynard expressed sympathy for their position, but refused to exclude the Esmeralda from the festivities.

“She’s one of the finest sailing ships in the world, and; one of the most desired to have in any port,” Braynard explained to reporters.

“We’re trying to do something positive, not dwell on past horrors. It’s too bad to hamper a good ceremony by bringing politics into the picture,” he said



Joining the tall-masted ships in New York Harbor were more than 10,000 small private boats, most heavily laden with spectators, which were kept out of the actual parade route by 150 Coast Guard vessels.

Also on hand were military ships from at least 35 different countries and a U.S. carrier group led by the aircraft carrier USS Forrestal.

The Forrestal itself was the scene of a gathering of more than 3,000 dignitaries and assorted guests, including Ford, Vice President

Nelson Rockefeller, and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

Other guests aboard the Forrestal were Prince Rainier and Princess Grace of Monaco, Crown Prince Harald and Crown Princess Sonja of Norway, and 70 foreign ambassadors.

Boarding passes for hundreds of other guests were distributed for viewing the tall ships from the decks of the USS Turner, the USS Pratt, USS Farragut, USS La Moure County, USS Harlan County, and USS Kalamazoo.

An estimated five million people lined the New York and New Jersey shores to take in the spectacle by land.

So what was it like to be there?

For four newly-minted Eagle Scouts from Long Island, the day began before 5 a.m., when they were told to meet at a Long Island Rail Road station in Seaford, New York, for the 45-minute train ride into the city.

“It is anticipated that traffic conditions will be extremely difficult on the 4th of July. Parking will be almost impossible,” the Navy had warned.

Almost everyone who planned to attend was told to take public or commercial transportation into the area, whenever possible.

Even then, as in the case of the scouts, an early start was advised.

Once actually at the pier, all guests who weren’t high-profile VIPs were asked to board one of the several open amphibious craft that were being used to transfer guests to their respective ships.

Once welcomed on board, guests were invited to freely wander designated areas on their ship’s deck and stake out locations for

picture taking on what turned out to be a sun-drenched if breezy July 4 morning and afternoon.

Meals on board the ships cost 50¢ cents for breakfast, \$1 for lunch, and an additional \$1 for dinner, if necessary.



Everyone was told to be prepared to remain onboard their respective ship until at least 4 p.m. or whenever the boat parade ended.

The flotilla began shortly before 8 a.m. when the first of the participating ships began moving north from their temporary berths near Sandy Hook, New Jersey and in Gravesend Bay, Brooklyn.

Positioned at its anchorage in the Verrazzano Narrows, the Forrestal was already surrounded by “wall-to-wall” pleasure boats, the Coast Guard said.

Scores of other warships stood at anchorages stretching from 72nd Street to the George Washington Bridge, while dozens more were anchored between the Statue of Liberty and Staten Island.

The tall-masted ships themselves were led up the Hudson River by the Coast Guard’s Eagle, followed by the Chilean Esmeralda, the Japanese four masted bark Nippon Maru and the Norwegian sailing vessel, the Christian Radich.

As they passed, city fireboats sprayed arcs of water into the air and several helicopters and at least one blimp, “mascot” of the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company, hovered overhead.

As the Netherlands schooner Eendracht passed, her crew stood at attention on her deck, eliciting cheers from the nearest bystanders.

Quick on her heels came the American schooner Western Union and the four-masted Club Mediterranee.

Larger ships passed single file, while the small ships came by in pairs.

The sounds of airhorns could be heard everywhere, and sailors, the vast majority of them perched in the elaborate rigging of the vessels, frequently returned the greetings.

Among these were the crew members of the Sagres II, from Portugal, and the Juan Sebastian de Elcano, from Spain.

History should note that the two oldest vessels to participate in the celebration were the Portuguese Gazela Primeiro, which was built in 1883 and had only recently been retired as a fishing vessel, and, oldest of all, the Mon Lei, a Chinese Junk built in Fukien, China. in 1855.



As night fell, several hundred thousands spectators remained jammed onto the shoreline of Lower Manhattan to watch a dazzling

fireworks show explode over the still churning harbor and the Statue of Liberty.

As for the scouts, they disembarked from the La Moure County by climbing down a rope ladder and climbing back into the amphibious landing craft.

Once back at the pier, they were greeted by Rep. Bella Abzug, D-N.Y., wearing a flowered dress and one of her trademark big hats.

“How did you like it? Wasn’t it wonderful?” she asked in a voice not unlike that of the actress Ethel Merman.

Writing in The New York Times the next day, reporter Richard F. Shepard observed that the “miracle was that everything went off pretty much on schedule; the disaster so many had feared did not take place.”

Yes, he admitted, there was “congestion ashore and afloat,” but “obliging spirits and helping hands turned the most glorious 4th in 100 years into a happy holiday.”

(Note: Sail4th 250, a parade of tall ships and international naval review, is coming to New York Harbor on July 4, 2026. The event is billed as the world’s largest peacetime armada of tall ships and naval vessels, with more than 30 countries participating. There will also be a Blue Angels flyover, fireworks, and a host of festival and other activities. Visit <https://freedom250.org> for more information.)

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